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THE CONVERSATION

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Lib Dem conference: cracks remain despite show of unity

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Oh, Come all ye faithful: Nick Clegg speaking to conference. David Cheskin/PA

Author



Emma Sanderson-Nash

Lecturer in politics, University of Sussex

Three years after the Clegg-Cameron wedding in the rose garden at Number 10, the Lib Dem Conference this week in Glasgow has showed signs of the strain. Much as Clegg attempted to rally the troops by claiming credit for the recovery, reminding the faithful that there were no easy options - and exciting the rank and file simply by being in office, behind the scenes delegates seemed angry, confused and weary.

Lib Dems are used to being unpopular, used to having to work ten times harder to be heard, to be taken seriously, to get anywhere. They are a resilient party, formed from the fusion of two centrist traditions in the painful merger of 1988 and familiar with the wilderness. Perhaps then, the rigours of office have worn them down. They are down in the polls, down in membership, and delegate attendance was down 25% on previous autumn conferences.

Something old

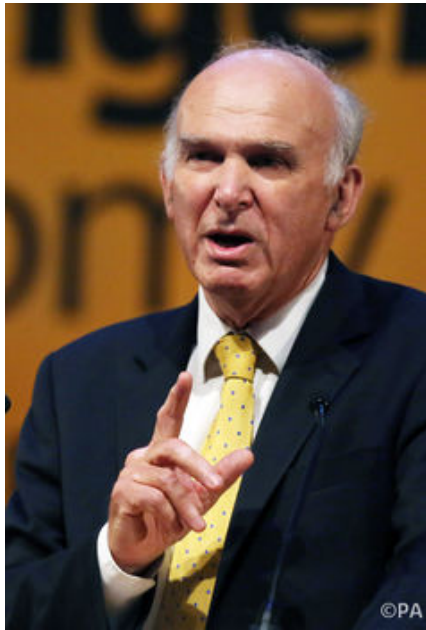
Still, given the Lib Dems' nuptial status within the current coalition, it was nice to see something old - democracy. The Lib Dems continue to encourage democratic debate and first-time speakers; and giving air-time to its PPCs and Councillors, as well as giving delegates the right to vote on policy. That at least, sets the Lib Dems apart from their rivals and is close to the activists' hearts.

The awkward squad, rather than use this platform, chose instead the keynote speech slot to vent their spleen before the cameras. But they remained away from the voting process. This seems to have been

the trade-off for Vince Cable, whose silence during the critical debate on the economy was more than made up for during his carefully constructed attack on conservative values later the same afternoon.

Something new

But there was something new too. This complex and unusual third party have started squaring up to one another. Not the Clegg/Cable divide, but the deepening of the battle lines between the two schools of thought represented most clearly by Cable and Alexander.



Awkward squaddie: Vince Cable. PA

That the left and right in the Lib Dems see recovery differently, should come as no surprise. What is new is the strength with which these differing views, one closer to the Tories, one closer to Labour, are being communicated.

Clegg will make strenuous efforts to claim credit for himself and his party, and be all things to all men. This, after all, is his best shot at justifying the coalition, formed at a time of, and largely because of, national crisis. Alexander has “gone native” with the Tories and nailed his colours so clearly to the Tory mast that his relationship with Cable is apparently non-existent. And Cable will flash amber lights, warn of short-termism, housing bubbles and caution that the recovery is far from stable. The half empty hall wasn’t listening. For the moment at least, Alexander has Clegg - and Clegg has the membership behind him.

Something borrowed

And there was something borrowed - leadership loyalty. The political science says that the membership of a party in office behaves differently to a party in opposition. The Lib-Dems are used to opposition and are finding the realities of office holding more than tricky. In common with Labour and the Conservatives, they are learning to publicly back their leader. Giving him a bloody nose stopped as soon as Clegg looked like getting the party into power.

But the membership’s appetite for cautioning, restraining, or at least affording him the maximum strategic flexibility to do a deal with either of the two main parties appears to be fading too. Although many of the speakers alluded to this, with some tub-thumping rhetoric about independence, the voting cards gave full backing for Clegg - every time.

This time the party rank and file backed coalition policies, such as nuclear power and upgrading Trident - so used are they, these days, to following the leadership line. They are perhaps missing the point that in a coalition that is Clegg’s job and not necessarily theirs.

Something blue

Finally, there was something blue. These are mid-term blues - and felt very deeply at a Lib Dem Conference. The party has a weight on its shoulders that seems hard to bear. The electorate has not forgiven Clegg for the u-turn on tuition fees. The party has very limited resources after losing “Short



Money” provided by the public purse to assist with opposition duties in parliament.

The party has a smaller staff, a smaller membership - and much of what was built up during the process of professionalisation appears to be in jeopardy. Poll ratings hovering in, or only just above, single figures and no old-school by-election-winning Chris Rennard to cheer them up. They cling to Eastleigh but that was 6 months ago. In the local and European elections next year they may well come fourth. Clegg has to persuade both of the other parties to see that UKIP, not the Lib Dems, is the greatest threat to the cosy cartel at the centre.

So this leaves the party, grimly perhaps, backing him, deciphering the code behind his repeated claim that the structural defect will only be gone if the current course of action (their coalition with the Tories) continues in to the next parliament. Those in the know are suggesting the party needs between 40 and 45 MPs at the minimum to be able to do such a deal. Given current polls, the party should be grateful that they lost the AV referendum and that they may just be able to achieve their goal and continue to influence government policy after 2015.



Gone native: Danny Alexander.

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